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FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT

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RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000879

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: A WORRISOME SUMMER FOR ASHGABAT DRIVERS

**¶11.** (U) Sensitive but Unclassified. Not for Internet distribution

**¶12.** (SBU) SUMMARY: In June, Turkmen authorities put a network of traffic monitoring cameras into operation throughout Ashgabat. Since the authorities did not provide citizens with advance notice about the system and its consequences, a large number of fines were suddenly being issued for traffic violations. These fines serve as an additional source of government revenue. However, the high cost of the fines and the frequency with which they are being issued has caused grumbling among Ashgabat drivers. This is especially true now that the authorities have decided to withhold free gas coupons to citizens with outstanding traffic fines. As a result, Ashgabat drivers are becoming more cautious about traffic violations, and pedestrians say they feel much safer moving about the city on foot.  
END SUMMARY.

#### TRAFFIC MONITORING CAMERAS

**¶13.** (SBU) Russian VOCORD traffic monitoring systems, installed over major thoroughfares throughout Ashgabat started functioning in June.

The devices consist of a high-resolution digital camera, speed-detecting radar, a PAL-video camera, infrared pulse floodlights, and a specialized server and software for data collection and analysis. The system allows for round-the-clock automated street monitoring, and is able to recognize and photograph license plates, traffic violations, accidents and traffic jams, as well as collect traffic flow statistics. Once collected, the data is broadcast to an observation center of the Interior Ministry's Traffic Police Department. The new system was not announced in the media or elsewhere, and Ashgabat residents learned of its existence only when traffic police started issuing fines. Fine notifications are mailed to drivers' home addresses, with a photograph of their vehicle, license plate number, a description of their alleged traffic violation, and the bill for the infraction.

#### NO FREE GAS COUPONS FOR DELINQUENT MOTORISTS

**¶14.** (SBU) The authorities have started withholding free gas coupons from drivers until they pay outstanding traffic fines. Beginning in late June, they began distributing the coupons for the second half of 2009 to all registered vehicle owners. This time, however, in order to receive the coupons, residents must first settle all outstanding traffic fines. If the traffic police computer system

shows a prior traffic violation for speeding, for example, the violator is sent to his community police unit to receive a fine notification print-out. After paying the fine to a bank, they must show their receipt to the traffic police unit stationed at the bank where the gas coupons are being distributed so that a unit officer can note the payment and authorize disbursement of the gas coupons. According to one Ashgabat resident, "It was not easy to get my fine notification for driving 11 kilometers/hour over the speed limit because at my community police unit, after checking piles of fine notifications, the police officer told me that my notification had not yet arrived from the Traffic Police headquarters. He told me to come back in a few days. I did not get it until five days later, which delayed my receipt of the gas coupons." The government has apparently found that linking fine payments to the gas coupons ensures that they are paid.

#### NEW SOURCE OF GOVERNMENT INCOME

¶5. (SBU) The minimum fine for speeding is 25 manats, about \$9; for talking on a cell phone while driving the fine is around 280 manats, or \$100. It should be noted that the fine, according to Turkmenistan's Code of Administrative Violations, must be paid within 15 days from the date the notification is presented to the driver, otherwise the fine goes up by 20 percent. One traffic police officer we spoke with said that about 50,000 fines were issued in June alone. At that rate, even with minimal fines imposed, the 45 cameras will have paid for themselves in short order. One Ashgabat taxi driver we spoke with said, "The government has found another way to rip people off."

¶6. (SBU) A number of drivers have received more than one

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notification. As another taxi driver opined, "Of course they (the government) didn't notify anyone in advance (about putting the traffic monitoring system into operation). It's not in their interest to do so. If they did so, people would be more cautious and the police would collect fewer fines, which would mean less money for them." Many taxi drivers rent their cars from someone else, in which case, the traffic violation and fine would end up going to the wrong person.

#### CAUTIOUS DRIVERS

¶7. (SBU) The installation of the cameras and imposition of fines has caused disgruntlement. Another driver said, "First they (government) increased the price of gas and now, instead of fixing the roads, they install cameras to make driving more expensive." Knowing that radar cameras can detect speeding at a distance of 50 meters or less, drivers routinely watch their speedometers when approaching the radars. Since the radars were installed, the number of traffic police officers in Ashgabat streets has decreased noticeably, now they are only seen in areas that do not have cameras. The city's pedestrians are happy about the monitoring system. One pedestrian said, "With so many unruly drivers in Ashgabat, having cameras on the streets will lower the number of accidents and deaths." Another positive aspect that some have noted is that "everyone is equal before the cameras, whether one is an ordinary citizen or even a policeman: Everyone pays the same fine, no excuses."

¶8. (SBU) COMMENT: The new traffic cameras in Ashgabat has caused discontent among many drivers because of the fines being imposed and the bureaucratic hassles with trying to prove payment of them. The authorities, however, see a number of benefits, including reduced traffic violations, increased revenues, and dispensing with the need for manual tickets issued by traffic police. Some have suggested that the new revenues being collected from the fines to repair roads and infrastructure in Ashgabat and the surrounding areas. END COMMENT.

MILES